

## Natural Killers—Rebuttal

I found Major David D. Pierson's May-June 1999 *Military Review* article "Natural Killers—Turning the Tide of Battle" inadequately researched and poorly thought out. I dispute many of Pierson's points and conclusions, such as his claim that 4 percent of soldiers are predisposed to be "natural killers" because of certain traits.

Pierson asserts that natural killers can be identified by such characteristics as being later-born sons, liking contact sports, displaying a caustic sense of humor and revealing a certain cluster of traits on a Myers-Briggs personality test. While Pierson concedes such characteristics do not *absolutely* determine a killer, he contends they provide a "good framework" and a "good baseline" for doing so.

I think Pierson's profiling approach is confused and based on questionable and even incorrect assumptions. I do not believe he has satisfactorily established that such natural killers really exist as he describes them.

In any group there are people who contribute disproportionately to group achievement. They do so for any number of reasons. In combat, for example, accuracy of marksmanship plays an important part. Familiarity with firearms before military service should be a factor in predicting how proficient a soldier uses them in combat. But Pierson's profile for proficient killers totally ignores civilian firearm experience. World War II hero Audi Murphy used firearms to hunt for food for himself and his family before he entered service. Would he have become a combat hero if he had never touched a rifle before basic training? I doubt it.

As a starting point for his assertion that a small number of soldiers contribute disproportionately to inflicting casualties on the enemy,

Pierson cites S.L. Marshall's book *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Peter Smith Publishing, Magnolia, MA, reprint 1975).

Marshall states, based on after-action interviews, that in Europe in World War II fewer than 25 percent of Army riflemen fired their rifles in any engagement, and in many engagements as few as 15 percent did so. Marshall's claim has been accepted as truth, but more recent research refutes it.

Because of time factors, it simply was not possible for Marshall to have conducted lengthy group interviews of as many infantry companies as he claimed he did. And, it was difficult to interview combat units because most of the time they were on the front lines or preparing to return there. The only way it could have been accurately determined who fired their rifles and how many times would have been not to conduct interviews but to have checked each M-1 after each engagement and count each rifleman's bullets.

Marshall's assistant in Europe could not recall Marshall ever asking soldiers about fire ratios or ever

discussing the topic in conversation. The National Archives historical records of the European Theater show no evidence that Marshall sought or collected firing-ratio statistics, and no material on this topic exists in Marshall's surviving papers. The serious consideration of Marshall's doubtful claim began when it was repeated by Harold P. Leinbaugh and John D. Campbell in their 1985 book *The Men of Company K: The Autobiography of a World War II Rifle Company* (out of print).

Pierson says that 50 percent of casualties are inflicted by 4 percent of soldiers who are "natural killers." He obviously means these 4 percent come from the 15 percent to 25 percent of soldiers he claims fire their weapons when others do not. But he furnishes no evidence and cites no authority or source for his claim, although he says these natural killers "have existed throughout the history of warfare." He refers to "some studies" that indicate such soldiers do half the killing, but he does not cite anything in his endnotes. Obvious questions are suggested by this claim.

How can it be said with certainty



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that 4 percent or less do 50 percent of the killing? And, are there finer gradations such as, perhaps, 1 percent doing 35 percent of the killing? Or is the killing evenly distributed across the 4 percent? Are there "hyperkillers" among the natural killers? Has anyone identified the members of the 4-percent subgroup and analyzed their salient character traits? No, that has not been done. Rather, Pierson assumes that such a subgroup exists and goes on to make sweeping assumptions.

Pierson refers to a study by R.L. Swank and W.E. Marchand, cited in Dave Grossman's book *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Little Brown and Co., New York, 1996), which proposed that 2 percent, not "about" 4 percent, of soldiers were aggressive psychopaths without normal remorse or trauma about killing. Other terms such as "sociopath" are now associated with such persons. But Swank and Marchand did not claim their 2 percent of soldiers were natural killers responsible for about half of combat deaths. Somehow Pierson assumes this. Obviously Pierson's natural killers are Swank and Marchand's psychopaths plus some others. Who are the others?

I also cannot accept Pierson's profile that gives heavy weight to being a later-born son as a predictor of combat effectiveness. Without citing any evidence, Pierson says natural killers are most likely to be later-born sons. But are later-born sons more likely to be sociopaths or psychopaths? Pierson cites no authority on this. The Swank and Marchand study did not claim they are.

Pierson refers to an Israeli Defense Force study that states first borns are "more anxious" than later borns and, therefore, seek less dangerous positions while later borns are more likely to volunteer for combat. But the study does not show that later borns are more likely to be among the one out of 25 who Pierson claims are responsible for about one out of two enemy deaths. Also, the study shows that later borns are more likely to seek danger. What percent of the Israeli Defense Force at the time of the study was made up of first-born sons? What

percent were later sons? Much more than 4 percent I'm sure.

Even if there are natural killers, and even if they are most likely later borns, what about all the soldiers who are later borns and who are not natural killers. And, if there is a strong connection between being a later-born son and being a natural killer, then armies with greater percentages of later borns would have greater percentages of natural killers. In the past, larger families were much more common than in our era. Therefore later borns were more common and first borns less common. Pierson's natural killers should have represented a larger percentage of military personnel.

Pierson also says that natural killers are aggressive athletes who excel in contact sports. This assertion is based on a study of Korean War veterans to determine those who took aggressive action in combat from those who were nonfighters, were hysterical or were unresponsive. But this study only concerned differences between fighters and nonfighters, not identifying natural killers. And, it did not claim that all or most soldiers who were not aggressive athletes or who did not excel in contact sports were nonfighters. Pierson misuses this study, just as he misuses the Israeli study and the Shrank and Marchand study, to establish conclusions the studies do not support.

Another identifying trait Pierson associates with natural killers is "a caustic sense of humor that relies on sharp wit and biting sarcasm." Yet he never claims that later-born sons; aggressive, contact-sport athletes; and sociopathic/psychopathic types are likely to have caustic senses of humor. All these traits should strongly correlate if they profile natural killers.

Personality test scores provide one more means Pierson says can identify natural killers. He claims those who have the characteristics of sociopathy/psychopathy are later borns, have caustic wit and enjoy contact sports are more likely to be extroverted, sensory, thinking, perceiving (ESTP) types on the military's Myers-Briggs personality test. Once again, problems arise

with correlating these traits and establishing that they really predict Pierson's natural killers.

Pierson fails to establish that there really exists a small subgroup of natural killers who inflict half of the battle deaths. He also fails to prove that the traits of this supposed subgroup relate to actual facts. With little effort, readers with reason will be able to discern how ludicrous Pierson's claims really are.

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## Domestic Operations? No!!

Any domestic operation by the US Army requires two authorizations: one from the requesting state's legislature and one from the US Congress in response to the application by the state's legislature (*US Constitution*, Article IV, Section 4 and Article I, Section 8).

The president's only constitutional role in domestic operations is to see that Congress "faithfully executes" any requirements for enacting such legislation (Article II, Section 3). The president has no other lawful authority than that.

Among Congress's powers is the right to "define and punish . . . felonies committed on the high seas." So the part of the "war on drugs" external to the United States; that is, on the high seas, is lawful (Article I, Section 8).

The frequently used term "civilian control" can only mean actions by Congress for things external to the United States and by Congress and the affected state's legislature for domestic operations. No other office has any part in civilian control.

In regard to the events at Waco, Texas, there is no statute of limitations on untimely violent deaths, and as the Nuremberg trials showed, "following orders" is no defense and cannot be a defense for the Army should it become involved in any other domestic operation.

My advice to the Army? When in doubt, be sure to follow—and operate well within—the provisions of the Constitution.

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